

*Hidden Spaces of Resistance of the Subordinated: Case Studies from Vietnamese Female Migrant Partners in Taiwan*¹

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This paper explores how contradictory social structures influence power relations between “Vietnamese brides” and their Taiwanese family members. By analyzing two aspects of interaction between “Vietnamese brides” and their husbands’ families, *i.e.*, how the families require them to integrate into Taiwanese society and what strategies they employ to escape from these constraints, we argue that contradictory social relations together with commodified marriage and liminality help them to develop strategies of escape into the “hidden space.” The development of these strategies indicates one thing: hegemony is never fully achieved – it is always negotiated and contested.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of “foreign brides”² is one of the international migration flows in our globalization times (del Rosario, 1994; Glodava and Onizuka, 1994; Ordonez, 1997; Piper, 1997; Suzuki, 2000; Kojima, 2001). Research has documented rapid increases in cross-border marriages involving men from Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong with women from the Philippines, Vietnam, China, Indonesia, and Thailand (Piper and Roces, 2003;

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²In this paper, I add quotation marks to terms that have derogatory connotations, though they are commonly used in Taiwan. In addition, I do not use “mail-order brides,” because this term has produced stigma on these female migrants to date.

Constable, 2005). This gendered migration flow has created new social categories with derogatory connotations like “*waiji xinniang*” (foreign bride) in Taiwan, or “*Japayuki*” (Japan-bound) in Japan. In Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, these cross-border female migrants are *de facto* economic migrants in the sense that their role is as unpaid reproductive workers (Kojima, 2001; Wang, 2001a; Seol, Kim, *et al.*, 2005).³

The rapid increase in the numbers of female migrant partners is mainly the result of transnational commercial agencies mediating between brides and grooms (Glodava and Onizuka, 1994; Ordonez, 1997; Constable, 2003). Taking Vietnam as an example, Taiwanese men pay around US\$7,000 to join a one-week matchmaking tour organized by an agency, and they can meet as many girls as they wish until they choose one, then hold the wedding ceremony in that same week. All necessary immigration documents will be applied for later by the commercial agency. After two months, the “Vietnamese bride” can move to Taiwan. This marriage process is described by Taiwanese scholars as “commodified cross-border marriages” (Wang and Chang, 2002).⁴

Though the phenomenon of cross-border marriage has a long history, it seems not to have attracted much attention from scholars in the past decades (Boyle, 2002). If they are represented in the media or academic research, migrant women from third-world countries are often depicted as victims of commodified marriages. For example, according to Ordonez (1997:126),

the oppression suffered by the [Filipino] mail-order bride is even more intense and complex because she is also a woman stigmatized by her own class and by both women and men within her own community for the method by which she enters into marriage.

³A reviewer raised the question, Why do Taiwanese families not hire domestic helpers but marry Vietnamese females to do domestic work? Three reasons: first of all, these males want to get married, and not only to have domestic workers. Secondly, the government's regulation only allows caretakers to work in Taiwan, so unless the family has disabled elders, or have two kids under twelve years old, there is no way to import a domestic helper (Lan, 2002, fn. 13). In addition, these Taiwanese grooms are not rich enough to afford a domestic helper, which cost about NT\$22,000 (US\$667) per month in 2003. The average monthly income of a manufacturing industrial worker was only NT\$39,583 (US\$1,200) in 2003 (*see* Directorate General of Budget Accounting and Statistics, 2004).

⁴When I use the term “commodified,” it does not mean that the Vietnamese female gets US\$7,000 paid by the Taiwanese man. In fact, the Vietnamese bride's family gets only US\$1,000 if they are lucky. Most money goes into the matchmaking agents' pocket. The term “commodification” is used to describe a marriage process arranged by profit-oriented organizations without any traditional meaning of “arranged marriage.”

These women are stigmatized partly by their poor class and gender position, and partly by the commodified way of marriage; this has led, in the Philippines, to the passing of legislation banning personal advertising and penalizing local commercial mediating agencies with imprisonment and fines (Ordonez, 1997:137). In Vietnam the government also announced its intention to invalidate all marriages mediated by commercial matchmaking agencies effective from July 1, 2003 (Decree No. 68/2002/ND-CP). The Taiwanese government is enacting a law to prohibit any profit-oriented matchmaking activity in the name of “protecting the disadvantaged female migrants.” Such legislation, however, does not have any effect on preventing this kind of cross-border marriage.

Commodified transnational marriages have become a hot topic in Asian countries such as Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Japan. Female migrant partners are represented as poor girls getting married for money, not for love, and thus this “money-exchanged” marriage is doomed to fail. Some people, in an attempt to counter this negative perception, try to prove that there are “good foreign brides” and that the couples are actually satisfied with their marriages. However, both views reduce this social issue to an individual level, failing to see the structural forces that lie behind the phenomenon.

Some Taiwanese scholars adopt a structural viewpoint, and represent the “foreign bride” as someone who is supposed to play the traditional role of daughter-in-law. Since more and more Taiwanese women resist playing this role, Taiwanese men use their economic power to marry girls from poor countries. According to this argument, because of uneven world economic development, girls in the third world could not survive, so marrying foreigners becomes one of the methods of escape from poor conditions (Xia, 2002). Combined with Chinese patriarchal oppression, these female migrant partners’ lives are filled with doom.

However, all these viewpoints emphasize the negative part of commodified marriage without examining its actual influences on micropower relations. It is seen as self-evident that commodified marriage results in a miserable life. In this paper, however, we stress how the commodification element of marriages affects the social relations within the family after these “foreign brides” move to Taiwan. Constable’s research on Chinese women marrying Americans has pointed to women’s agency, selectivity, and choice, as opposed to popular belief in mail-order brides’ desperation (2003:145–174). In the literature of female migrant domestic workers, it has also been argued that these women are not entirely passive recipients of hegemonic ideology

(Yeoh and Huang, 1998; Lan, 2003). I accept this proposition, but would further ask the question, Under what conditions can these female migrant partners exercise their agency?

Much literature has documented women who make creative use of the limited opportunities available to them to strengthen their position in power relations (Kelsky, 2001; Constable, 2003, 2005; Lan, 2003; Freeman, 2005), but little attention has been paid to where the opportunities are. Here I will argue that contradictory social relations produce a space where these female migrant partners can maneuver and manipulate for their own interests. Although female migrant partners are disadvantaged in Taiwan, in terms of their socioeconomic background, the commodification element, which brings them to start a new journey in their life history, has a strong influence on the social relations within the family and, paradoxically, helps them to develop strategies to escape social controls if there is a space produced by contradictory social relations. Two aspects of interactions will be discussed: how the husbands' families ask female migrant partners to follow Taiwanese social norms, and how these women use various strategies to escape social controls.

Within the context of Taiwan and its closest neighbors, the number of female migrant partners from Southeast Asia and China to Taiwan has increased significantly in the past decade. Table 1 shows that about one out of eight newlywed couples in Taiwan were transnational in 2004,

TABLE 1
STATISTICS OF FOREIGN MIGRANT PARTNERS AND THEIR BABIES IN TAIWAN

Year	According to Household Registrations			Taiwanese Married with Foreign Nationals (%)	Newly Born Babies Whose Mothers Are Migrant Partners (%)
	Marriage Registrations (couples)	Non-Chinese Foreign Spouses (persons)	Chinese Spouses (persons)		
1998	145,976	10,413	15,041	17.4	5.1
1999	173,209	14,670	21,165	20.7	6.0
2000	181,642	21,338	26,474	26.3	7.6
2001	170,515	19,405	32,719	30.6	10.7
2002	172,655	20,107	33,840	31.2	12.5
2003	171,483	19,643	34,426	31.4	13.4
2004	131,453	20,338	10,972	23.8	13.2
2005	141,140	13,808	14,619	20.1	12.9

Sources: 1. Data 1998 to 2002 are from Directorate General of Budget Accounting and Statistics, *Guoqing tongji tongbao* (Reports on National Development), published on August 26, 2003.
2. Data 2003 to 2005 are from Ministry of Interior, *Neizheng tongji tongbao* (Reports on Internal Affairs), week 3, 2006. <http://www.moi.gov.tw/moi2004/upload/m_38736_6618287037.doc>.
3. Data on newly born babies in 2003, 2004, and 2005 are from Ministry of Interior, *Neizheng tongji tongbao* (Reports on Internal Affairs), week 22, 2006. <<http://www.moi.gov.tw/stat>>.

excluding those involving “Chinese brides,” who are not officially considered as foreigners. If they are included, the proportion can be as high as one-third.⁵

Our research focuses on female migrant partners from Vietnam, which accounts for the biggest proportion of all “foreign brides,” about 61%, excluding Chinese migrant partners (Ministry of Interior, 2003). These cross-border marriages between Vietnam and Taiwan are different from the well-documented ethnic marriages (Lievens, 1999; Thai, 2002; Freeman, 2005). Transnational marriages in the Mekong Delta area are mainly Vietnamese females with Taiwanese males, as the data from Can Tho province show 11,094 females marrying Taiwanese between 2000 and 2003, comprising 93% of total cross-border marriages, while marriages with people from the USA, Canada, or Australia, where most Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) reside, comprised only 4.9% (Chien and Quang, 2004: tables 1.3, 1.4). A general survey done by the Taiwan government shows that 71% of migrants from Southeast Asia received less than nine years of education, while only 6.9% of them have a tertiary degree (Ministry of Interior, 2004:19, table 2). The data from 1996 to April 2000, compiled by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in Ho Chi Minh City, which is in charge of issuing entry visas to Taiwan, records that Vietnamese female migrant partners’ average education is 6.3 years, and their age at the time of marriage is 23.3. Their husband’s average education is 8.5 years, and they get married at the age of 36.1 (TECO, 2002). In Taiwan, the compulsory education has been nine years since 1968; in other words, only those born before 1956 could receive less than nine years of compulsory education. Among the 82,358 surveyed informants marrying foreigners, more than 81% of them were born after 1958 (Ministry of Interior, 2004:35, table 19). The average education of those born after 1956 is 11.3 years (Wang, 2001b:337, table 3), so we know that these Taiwanese grooms are much less educated.

The empirical data used to illustrate my argument will be drawn from primary documentation and field research in Taiwan. The data for my study are mainly from two sources: first, a survey using in-depth interviews was undertaken in July–October 1999 to learn about the daily life of 55 female Vietnamese migrant partners.⁶ These fifty-five informants received 7.2 years

⁵Because of the political situation between Taiwan and China, citizens of the People’s Republic of China are officially, though not de facto, considered as citizens of Taiwan, R.O.C. Related immigration affairs are therefore processed by the Mainland Affairs Council (2003).

⁶All of them were interviewed outside the Vietnam Economic and Cultural Office in Taipei when they went there to give up their Vietnam nationality status to apply for naturalization. With their consent, they were invited by the researcher to a restaurant to be interviewed, and each interview lasted approximately two hours.

of education, while their husbands had 9.9 years of education, and their age of marriage was 23.4 and 36.7, respectively, very close to the data from TECO. Regarding the ethnic background of these female Vietnamese migrants, 78% of them replied that their fathers are ethnic *Kinh*, and their fathers' average education is 8.1 years. Second, fieldwork was done in a rural village in Chang-hua county from July to September 2003, and a follow-up visit was made in July 2004. I had to develop personal networks to reach these informants because they tended to avoid answering questions about their private life. Through assisting teaching in the Chinese language class provided by the Chang-hua government, we were able to reach these informants. Till the end of the class, ten families were interviewed, including nine Vietnamese women, and 12 other family members. Since our samples are limited, our research partly has to rely on previous works done by other Taiwanese scholars. Yet, the aim of this paper is not to attain a statistically representative sample; rather, I try to use knowledge accumulated through an interpretive approach to come to grips with how these female migrant partners develop their strategies to improve their disadvantaged social conditions.

The following discussion will first provide an analytical framework for understanding the possible space of resistance, based on James Scott's concept of hidden transcript (1990) and the structuralist view of social movement (Pile, 1997). Then I will clarify the cultural meaning of marriage in traditional Taiwanese society and compare it with "commodified" transnational marriage. Here, I attempt to argue that the same social norms imposed on Taiwanese and Vietnamese women produce different social effects due to different marriage processes and their social embeddedness in the society. The article will then discuss the strategies developed by these female migrant partners to escape from social norms and find a hidden space of their own. Finally, it will address future perspectives on this phenomenon, and will consider the possibilities of female migrants' social agency to change structural constraints.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HIDDEN SPACES OF RESISTANCE

People who worry about the lives of "foreign brides" in Taiwan often consider them as victims of commodification and traditional customs. This "victim image" is based on two assumptions: first, "foreign brides" are here to be Taiwanese daughters-in-law, which inevitably evokes the pity image of a traditional daughter-in-law related to Chinese patriarchy. Second, since they

are “bought” by the Taiwanese groom to serve the family, they will be considered as “exchanged goods,” treated without respect.

Would “foreign brides,” however, passively accept their position? Scott (1990) has pointed out that the “infrapolitics” of the subordinated is usually not confrontational, and if we want to understand the whole picture of power relations, we need to understand the “hidden transcript” of these subordinated women. Drawing on this proposition, female migrant partners’ open interactions with their families may not be the whole story. Only by knowing their hidden transcript, *i.e.*, what they think and what they do outside public normal space, we can understand the real power relations.

Though Scott’s concept of hidden transcript is useful in depicting the strategies of the subordinated in resisting domination, this concept is not adequate to explain this complex, multifaceted world, which is not dualist and, therefore, not based on two opposite poles as are his case studies of landlord and tenant farmers. If the world were binary, it would be difficult to understand the behaviors of those people located in a contradictory social position (Wright, 1980), *e.g.*, a third-world native professional manager in a multinational corporation who is dominant in the host society but subordinated in the global capitalist economy. Likewise, those Taiwanese men marrying Vietnamese women in our study are mostly from the lower social strata, whereas they are relatively powerful *vis-à-vis* “Vietnamese brides.”

From the structuralist perspective our daily practices are structured in different social relations, which seem not easy to extract from hegemonic control. However, these social relations sometimes contradict each other, and under this circumstance it will create a space to be exploited or into which to escape from the normal controls. In other words, if we remap the spaces of resistance, they can be viewed as partially dislocated from the spaces of domination (Pile, 1997:14).

For example, an employer prefers not to let migrant domestic helpers go out. If so, why do Filipina maids have more days of rest than other racial groups both in Taiwan and in Singapore (Yeoh and Huang, 1998:588; Wu, 2002)? The religious norm of going to church on Sundays contradicts the employer’s power to prohibit the maid’s going out. Combined with the state’s non-compulsory rule of one day off every week, it produces a discursive space for Filipina maids to take a day off after bargaining with their employers. We call these spaces produced by contradictory social relations as “hidden spaces.” Why is it called “hidden”? Because hidden spaces do not exist in “normal” social relations. It is a space in which the subordinate can hide, escape from norms, or find weapons to resist.

An important segment of this hidden space is the time-space liminality,⁷ where normal social relations are disrupted (Yeoh and Huang, 1998:595). Migrant workers in the receiving countries or places are located in a position of liminality, temporarily *de-embedded*⁸ from their social relations and unhinged from the scripted roles like mother, father, or daughter. This liminal position helps them to take actions against dominants, as in the case of migrant female workers participating in labor activities in Jowo, West Java, Indonesia (Silvey, 2003). In the same vein, these “Vietnamese brides” in Taiwan are de-embedded from both native and Taiwanese social relations, which differentiate them from Taiwanese daughters-in-law embedded in the local social context.

SOCIAL NORMS OF INTEGRATION

Taiwanese business people began to invest in Southeast Asia in the mid-1980s, and Vietnam was one of the favorite destinations for these people. Many Taiwanese investors and managers work in Vietnam (Wang and Hsiao, 2002), and their lifestyles give the local people an impression that they are very rich. Many Vietnamese girls who wanted to marry Taiwanese had expected to have a better life like these investors and managers, and therefore be able to send money back to their parents. However, no sooner had they arrived in Taiwan than they found out that their husbands’ social status was not what they had imagined. Most men who marry “Vietnamese brides” belong to lower to middle strata of society, and most of them are blue-collar workers or farmers (Wang and Chang, 2002:101). This low socioeconomic status of their husband’s family means that these female migrant partners have to do most domestic work, which is traditionally defined as women’s work, or more precisely, work of a daughter-in-law in traditional Chinese society. The role of daughter-in-law is the first thing a “foreign bride” has to learn after her arrival in Taiwan.

⁷Liminality as developed by Victor Turner means that it is a transitional state between two phases, and individuals are “in between.” They do not belong to the society that they previously were a part of and they are not yet reincorporated into the new society (1974).

⁸In an article on economic action and social structure, Mark Granovetter argues that most human actions are closely embedded in networks of interpersonal relations (1992:73). In this vein, I will describe those people and behaviors not set in interpersonal networks as “de-embedded” from the society.

Learning To Be a Good Daughter-In-Law in a Patriarchal Society

Marriage in Chinese societies is traditionally supposed to bind two families together, not just the groom and the bride. Its main purpose is to “get” a daughter-in-law for the husband’s family, which is regarded as more important than to have a “wife” for the groom. Family is organized by the patriarchy lineage principle, and other relations are not as important as the paramount “parents-children” axis. To have a male descendant is the responsibility of a married couple, to keep this lineage going on forever. To remain childless is the most unfilial thing (*buxiao you san, wuhou wei da*). Therefore, one duty of a filial daughter-in-law is to have a boy (Seaman, 1981:383).

In addition, a daughter-in-law is expected to serve her parents-in-law. However, this norm produces the major conflict in a family, *i.e.*, the conflict between daughter- and mother-in-law. Quarrelsomeness of Chinese women in a family is well-documented in academic research. In her research of the Chinese patriarchal family system, Margery Wolf refers to the solidarity group forged by women as “uterine family,” which is based on their roles as mother. A newlywed woman in a new family is often regarded as a threat to the original uterine family organized by mother and son. If a threat comes from a daughter-in-law, the woman looks for faults that will give her an opportunity to assert her authority as mother-in-law (Wolf, 1981:346–347). The mother-in-law can assert her authority based on her senior status in a family sanctioned by the social norms. In contrast, as we will see, a newlywed can hardly escape the role of daughter-in-law, which is enforced by tight social and ideological controls. “Foreign brides” are expected by their husbands’ families to be good daughters-in-law as well.

Ancestor worship rites further enhance this cultural institution. A female after her death is not worshiped in the natal family, but in her husband’s family. If she dies before “marry-out,” the natal family cannot put her name in the lineage. Her enshrined tablet must be put in the “Virgin Temple” (*guniang miao*), or the natal family has to find a man to marry her ritually so that the female’s soul can find a place to rest.

This family system with ideological control is patriarchal and to women’s disadvantage. Ritually, a female not married or “kicked out by her husband” will become a wandering soul after death. Socially, no matter how she is treated, she must be obedient to her parents-in-law. The natal family should not interfere in the affairs between a “married out” daughter and her new family. If the female does not conform to the husband’s family, the natal family will be stigmatized; so even if the daughters return to their natal family to ask for

help, they are often told to put up with their situation.⁹ Moreover, divorced women are stigmatized and have difficulties in the society. The saying that every woman should have three obediences indicates the situation of a Chinese woman: in deference to her father before marriage, to her husband when married, and to her son when her husband dies (*zaijia congfū, chujia congfū, fusi congzi*) (Seaman, 1981:383).

Though Taiwan has experienced rapid social change in the past few decades, this patriarchal ideology is still prevalent in some groups. The hegemonic masculinity culture has motivated Taiwanese men to seek the “ideal traditional wife” from Vietnam, which, in turn, reinforces the masculinity culture (Tien and Wang, 2006). Embedded in this society of unequal gender relations, would these newly arrived female migrants be in a more disadvantaged situation than Taiwanese women? The commodified marriage results in vitally different social relations from those of Taiwanese women; “Vietnamese brides” are *de-embedded* from the host society, which helps them to escape from some social norms forced on them.

Traditional vs. Commodified Arranged Marriages

Getting married to a stranger through commercial agencies may sound odd for those who believe that marriage should be based on love and mutual understanding. But in the fieldwork, men who marry “Vietnamese brides” do not think it is improper, and from time to time they like to compare their marriages with traditional arranged marriages (*xiangqin*). Before the 1950s, Taiwanese parents decided marriage with the help of a matchmaker. Young people had no voice in their own marriage and often met their husband or wife for the first time on the wedding day. Money and gifts were exchanged between the two families after both sides agreed to marry their daughter and son (Baker, 1979). A matchmaker gets *hongbao*, red envelopes with money inside, from the groom’s side. Most men marrying “foreign brides” say that the money paid to the commercial mediating agency is the same as *hongbao*, and the fact that they have not met their wives beforehand is similar to what happens with traditionally arranged marriages.

⁹A typical case happened in the author’s family in the 1950s. My aunt was physically abused by her husband and went home to ask for help. My grandparents advised her to endure and be submissive to her husband and parents-in-law. She was sent back to her husband after a few days. After a few years, my grandparents were informed of her death, at the age of 28. My grandfather suspected that she was abused to death.

But do they really mean the same thing? In her research about women and family in rural Taiwan, Margery Wolf (1972:105–106) said,

Traditional Taiwanese engagement and wedding ritual is so richly colorful that the foreign observer is often tempted to dwell on the ceremonies to the detriment of the topics that more closely concern the Taiwanese. The “social research” and negotiation that precede a conventional engagement are of much more interest to the Taiwanese observer. The ceremony simply signifies their successful completion. In Taiwanese terms a wedding ceremony is not an act by which two people are united as a married couple, but an announcement to the ancestors and to the numerous friends and relatives invited to feast that the family has taken a daughter-in-law, the first step to extending itself yet another generation.

Traditionally, marriage is so important that both sides have to know the social background of the other family in detail. Much work is devoted to understanding the background of each other. Compared to this tradition, the commodified marriage is arranged by profit-oriented agencies, and the groom chooses a female to marry during a one-week “marriage tour.” The bride’s family has no idea of the groom’s social background (Wang and Chang, 2003).

In the fieldwork we often heard from the grooms that they compare the money paid to the commercial mediating agency with traditional betrothal money. They think that the two things are the same. However, the social logic behind these two money flows is totally different. Traditionally the groom has to give the bride’s family a lump sum of money, which is negotiated between the two families, with the help of a matchmaker. The bride’s family also has the obligation to give dowry when the daughter marries. It is a give-and-take exchange system. In other words, it is a credit-debit relation, and the receipt of a gift is a liability for the taker, who must pay back the giver. Through these back-and-forth gift exchanges, a new social relation is created and maintained (Mauss, 1990; Wang and Chang, 2003).

In a commodified transnational marriage, however, the money spent by the groom is not for creating a new social relation between the two families. Money is given to a mediating agency, and the bride’s family just takes what the agency gives without any power to say no in this process. In addition, we do not see any dowry to “pay back,” which obviously shows that this marriage is not a credit-debit exchange system. Therefore, the social logic behind the traditionally arranged marriage and the commodified transnational arranged marriage is very different. The former aims to create and develop bilateral social relationships between two families, while the latter aims to have a quick market exchange. This “buy-out woman” image combined with poor Chinese daughter-in-law image produces the prevailing discourse that these female Vietnamese migrants could be easily abused in Taiwan’s social context.

What Do These Vietnamese Daughters-in-Law Do in Taiwan?

We mentioned that the two main duties of a daughter-in-law are to serve the husband's parents and to give birth to a baby. Kojima has argued persuasively that the mail-order brides are substitutes for women of rich countries, who resist conventional forms of marriage based on oppressive domesticity, and fill a reproductive work gap created between women and men. These mail-order brides are categorized as "female migrant reproductive workers" (2001:204). The data of my in-depth interviews also shows the reproductive role imposed on "Vietnamese brides" in Taiwan. The average size of household of these "Vietnamese brides' families, excluding children, is 3.76, whereas with Taiwanese it is only 2.94. It means that most parents-in-law live with their Vietnamese daughter-in-law. In addition, the time of giving birth to the first baby is 1.3 years after the marriage, about half the time of the Taiwanese (2.6 years). In other words, these "Vietnamese brides" are expected to be "reproductive workers" in the family.

Childcare is an important task for these migrant women. One male informant said that "I do not want to marry a beautiful wife. I only expect her to take care of the family and to give birth to a baby." Many Vietnamese females had dreamed of finding a job in Taiwan to make some money, but the reality of daily life in Taiwan is that they are expected to take care of children, to shop, to cook, to laundry, and to do casual work if there is any. Another Vietnamese informant complained her father-in-law "prohibits me going out to work, though I want to have a job. They want me to take care of my children and stay at home, not to hang around." After living in Taiwan for a few years, these migrant women gradually know what roles they are required to play in the host society; as Phuong (pseudo name) said, "now I understand what a good daughter-in-law means, *i.e.*, to avoid confrontation with parents-in-law, and to look after the whole family."

Here I do not have any intention to make the claim that all families in Taiwan are oppressive to Vietnamese brides. As I will describe, one is located in different social relations at the same time, and in different social situations one faces different conditions to cope with. There is no "totalitarian" family regime. Family should not be regarded as a coherent unit to be either "oppressive" or "supportive." Within the family relations there are many social relations, *e.g.*, mother and son, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, wife and husband, sister-in-law and brother-in-law, male and female. People in a household do not always share the same interests, and therefore, Taiwanese social norms imposed on these brides are always negotiated when they come into practice.

STRATEGIES OF ESCAPE

In Taiwan, married women are often taught “what cannot be cured must be endured.” However, “Vietnamese brides,” de-embedded in the Taiwanese society, are not so submissive. Knowing their importance to the family, they can try to find a space away from social controls.

As mentioned above, due to the ideological controls, the noninterference principle of natal family, and social moral pressures, it is not easy for a miserable woman in the Taiwanese society to escape from these controls. But these social controls are not fully applicable to female migrant partners because of their positions of liminality. First, families of brides are far away in Vietnam, and it is difficult to exert social pressure on these female migrants to stand unbearable conditions. Nor do these female migrants have an extensive kinship network in Taiwan to push them to conform to the social norms. The in-depth interview survey shows that they do not have strong connections either with Vietnamese friends in Taiwan or Taiwanese friends. Only 14 out of 55 informants (about one-fourth) reported that they have good friends in Taiwan. In other words, their social relations embedded in Taiwanese society are less dense than those of Taiwanese women; this will alleviate the social pressures put on them. In addition, social relations in a family might contradict each other, which will create a space to which these female migrant partners can escape from total social control. In the following section, I will demonstrate how these female migrants develop different strategies, which the powerful cannot see, to escape these social norms. Two dimensions of their daily lives are analyzed here: life within the family and life outside the family.

Hidden Spaces in Family

Family is often considered as a coherent unit while being analyzed, but it consists of various relationships, *e.g.*, husband-wife, parents-children, and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The relationship with the husband can be very different from that with other family members. Having a male baby might change a woman’s status in the family, and her interests in children might be different from those of her parents-in-law. Therefore, it is incorrect to oppose “foreign brides” to their families, assuming that the family as a whole is an oppressive place for them. Since these social relations are not always consistent, if some contradictory social relations emerge in the family, it might produce a resistance space for some members of the family, *e.g.*, the female migrant partner. In this hidden space, the female migrant partner can find strategies to

resist. Here we discuss two strategies that are commonly used by these women: manipulating intimate relations with their husbands, and threatening to leave Taiwan.

Intimate Relations with Husband. Since the cross-border marriage is brought about through a commodification process, the husband's own preferences are also taken into consideration, which is not the same as finding a status-matched wife for the family's reputation. In this situation, when the parents-in-law want to control the daughter-in-law, they also have to consider their son's feelings. For these female migrants, no matter whether they like their husbands or not, at least they can keep a more private social space with their husband, and so escape from the role of daughter-in-law.

Quite often heard in the fieldwork from our informants is "the most important support in Taiwan is the husband. Those runaway brides are often those poor women with bad husbands." The intimate relations with their husbands are the main means in a family whereby these female migrants can improve their social conditions. For example, when Thuyet lived with her parents-in-law, her mother-in-law always scolded her about her domestic work, even when she had done most of the work. The only time to escape from mother-in-law's vigilance was to go out with her husband to the Vietnamese restaurant or night market. At that time, husband's income was handed to his mother. Thuyet had no income available at all. After a few years, she persuaded her husband to move out, and took charge of the family's expenditures. Thuyet said that she might divorce in the future, but right now her husband is the only one that she can rely on. Research in Jiayi county tells the same story, *i.e.*, the relationship with the husband is more instrumental than affectionate (Li, 2002:46–50).

The cases discussed imply that the social norms call for disciplining these female migrants to work hard and to serve their parents-in-law, but the contradictory social relations between husband-wife and parents-in-law and daughter-in-law produce a limited space to exploit husband-wife relations against mother-in-law's authority. The husband-wife relationship can be manipulated based on the fact, as explained, that the commodified arranged marriage enhances the husband's power in the marriage process; he does not have to be too concerned about his mother or the family interests.

Threatening to Leave Taiwan. In Freeman's research (2005), Chosonjok brides used the threat of divorce to negotiate a favorable outcome for themselves in South Korea. The threat to divorce and leave Taiwan is also often heard in our fieldwork. Among the fifty-five interviewees, eight of them (about 15%)

replied that they had seriously considered divorcing their husbands and leaving Taiwan in the first few years. In the fieldwork we also heard, in many cases, that the female migrant partners planned to divorce in the future.

To say “I will return to Viet Nam and never be back again” is a signal of threat. The female migrant partners know very well that it will cost the husband’s family much if they really escape from Taiwan and return to Vietnam. The cost includes the money the husband paid to the commercial agency, the face lost in the neighborhood, and the loss of a good domestic helper. Since the husband’s family relies heavily on the female migrant partner’s reproductive service, “threaten to leave” becomes a weapon that she can use.

In Taiwan, many women do not divorce even if their married life is not happy. Divorce means to break all the social relations between the two families. But the social relationship based on commodification marriage is only between two persons, and to break this social relationship is not so difficult, whereas the Taiwanese women are embedded in a more dense social network. Mr. Dong married his first Vietnamese wife in 1996, and gave more than US\$10,000 to the matchmaking agency. At that time, the Taiwanese government had introduced regulations whereby female migrant partners had to return to their native countries after living for six months in Taiwan. Then they had to apply for a further one-year residence visa in an overseas Taiwanese embassy. Mr. Dong’s wife used this regulation, and had never come back to Taiwan when she returned to Vietnam. Mr. Dong’s father was very angry, but could not do anything to oblige her to come back. Mr. Dong married his second wife in 2000, and again, spent more than US\$7,000.

Commodified marriage is often condemned as a kind of evil that distorts the “normal” social relations, but from the experience of these Vietnamese migrant partners, the commodified marriage offers a role that is different from the traditional one. Traditional Taiwanese daughters-in-law have to follow norms set by the society even when their marriages are not successful. But for these migrant partners, the commodification element makes it easier to escape from unhappy marriages without bothering to consider the social norms in Taiwan. Uprooted female migrant partners are not embedded in the social network and, in addition, there are the governmental regulations which produce a free space wherein they can maneuver.

Public Space Is Private Space: Away from Home

The “Vietnamese brides” do not feel easy in the family and neighborhood, where they are always supervised or gossiped about. Only by escaping from

these “private” spaces can they find their real “private spaces.” In Puli, one Vietnamese restaurant becomes the most popular place for these women to meet, to exchange information, and most important, to escape from the family. Loan gave an example to describe the social function of this small Vietnamese restaurant:

one girl came here to cry for help. She had bad luck here, and wanted to escape from her family, to find a job in the city. She asked me to find a job for her. Another girl was often abused by her husband. She wanted to work, but her husband did not allow it. He demanded the wife to stay at home, but he could go out for a drink with his friends. So she came here very often to chat with us. (Chen, 2003:68)

For these migrant women, going shopping, attending Mandarin-language lessons, or even surreptitiously slipping away from the family help to temporarily escape from the family controls.

Even though there were more than 90,000 female Vietnamese spouses in Taiwan at the end of 2005, they had neither a strong organization nor dense social networks. This is mainly due to the strict limitations set by the husbands’ families. Taiwanese are anxious about all kinds of social networking organized by these migrant partners, and they often stigmatize the gatherings as “learning something bad from each other.” These husbands worry that their wives may be “infected” through comparing their situations with those of other “foreign brides” with invidious results. Asked about letting their daughter-in-law attend Mandarin lessons, Mai’s parents declined bluntly:

I am afraid that she will learn something bad from other girls. They always like to compare with each other. For example, they will compare how much betrothal money they got when they got married. Or to show off how rich they are, and do not have to work. It is better not to go with other women. She should stay at home to take care of her children.

Upon this excuse, most Taiwanese husbands or parents-in-law do not like the wives to join any Vietnamese social networks. Even though they allow their spouses to attend the counseling course offered by the government, they ask the government to “take care of” them, which in reality means checking whether they really go to the class or not. So in the counseling class, every student has a “home correspondence” notebook. It is used to confirm the movements of these female migrants. When they come to the class, the teacher will put a stamp on the notebook to prove that these female migrants are not absent from the class. At home, the migrant partners have to ask their husbands to sign their name so that the teacher knows that their husbands have reviewed the notebook (Shen and Wang, 2003).

However, these migrant women find some strategies to connect with each other and develop a social network of their own. Here I will discuss the roles of mobile phones and counseling courses for "foreign brides."

In 1999 when I started my interviews with Vietnamese female migrant partners, there were less than 25,000 Vietnamese, and only a few were eligible for citizenship application. One has to stay at least five years to apply for citizenship, which means that only those married before 1994 were eligible at the time of my interview. In addition, there was not any support system for the newly arrived immigrants in 1999. However, in 2003, the time I conducted fieldwork in Chang-hua, the number of Vietnamese spouses has reached more than 60,000. Besides, the government policy has changed, and many counseling courses are provided. Another important factor is the widespread use of mobile phones in Taiwan society after 2000. In 1998, there were only 4.7 million mobile users, while in 2003, there were 25.1 million, more than Taiwan's population of 24.0 million (Directorate General of Telecommunications, 2005). In other words, the policy change together with the widespread use of mobile phones made it easier for the brides who arrived after 2000 to build up their social relations.

Many informants have their own mobile phones, which save all the phone numbers of their close friends. Since the parents-in-law often monitor their daughter-in-law's phone calls, the best way to escape this censorship, and at the same time create a private space of their own, is to use a mobile phone. In the fieldwork I find that most of them use prepaid cards, which is much more expensive than the normal mobile phone rates. One explains that the purpose of using the more expensive prepaid card is to evade the surveillance of their husbands' families. Billing statements will not be sent home, and husband or parents-in-law will never know how much she spends on the phone, and, more importantly, to whom she talks. Through this modern technology, "foreign brides" can know the situation of each other. Even though they do not meet regularly, they can have the most up-to-date news about others through the mobile connections, which creates a mobile social space into which the other family members cannot easily intrude and monitor what happens.

In addition to this telespace, there are some physical spaces that these female migrant partners can go to. One social space is created by the government, which provides free courses for newly arrived female migrant partners to help them to "accommodate" Taiwanese customs. Since it is not a compulsory course for migrants, these female migrant partners often have to persuade their families to let them attend. The case of Mai mentioned above shows that not every family likes the daughter-in-law to learn Mandarin.

No matter whether the curriculum is designed to discipline these female migrants as good daughters-in-law or not, the class becomes a bazaar to exchange Vietnamese VCD and cuisines, not a place for learning Taiwanese culture as originally planned by the government. Since the husbands pick them up immediately when the class is over, and they have to rush home to cook, it is almost impossible to have an after-class gathering. The time in the class is the only opportunity to make friends, so they all like to come to the class and to exchange information with others (Shen and Wang, 2003). This "Counseling Course for Foreign Brides" is the way that the Taiwan state wants to normalize these immigrants, but it contradicts the interests of their local families, which prefer them to stay at home. This contradiction produces a hidden space for these "Vietnamese brides," and helps them to organize their social networks in this space.

CONCLUSION

This paper places the "commodified cross-border marriage," a part of the globalization process, in a local context to explore how the commodification of marriage reshapes the social relations inside the family, how these female migrant partners position themselves in the society, and what strategies of escape they develop.

I first differentiate the "commodified marriage" from the traditional arranged marriage, then expose the norms for female migrant partners established by the Taiwanese family structure. Female migrant partners are expected to become good daughters-in-law and to have a male descendant. No matter what beautiful future they had dreamed of in Vietnam, they are required to be assimilated into the Taiwanese society, confined to the role of a good daughter-in-law, a good wife, and a good mother.

Though disadvantaged, these female migrant partners are still able to develop strategies to escape these norms of integration. Their conditions are different from those higher-educated women marrying Americans in Constable's research, who possess better human capital, have a better life in China, and "can thus maneuver within these structures in creative ways" (2003:174). The space to maneuver for these Vietnamese females is much more limited, and therefore they need a space produced by the contradictory social relations in Taiwan, rather than by their own human capital, to exercise their agency. It is a space I call "hidden space" that is temporarily dislocated from the spaces of domination, where the agency of these migrant females can be exercised.

Contradictory social relations combined with liminality and commodified marriage produce a “hidden space” for them to resist domination. They have less social network support, but this “de-embedded” social condition in a way helps them to suffer less from social constraints and moral censure. Furthermore, since the relations between these Vietnamese females and their husbands’ families started with commodification, these women can in turn use the same logic of “exchange” and threaten to return to Vietnam when they are fighting against unreasonable requirements from the husbands’ families. Manipulating “intimate relations” to temporarily escape the role of daughter-in-law, going shopping, and networking the Vietnamese community through mobiles, local Vietnamese restaurants, and language class are the strategies employed to escape from the norms of integration imposed by Taiwanese society.

The development of these strategies tells one thing: hegemony is never fully achieved – it is always negotiated and contested. Normal social relations only produce hegemonic space, whereas contradictory social relations produce hidden spaces, away from hegemonic controls. These hidden spaces become the possible places of resistance, and the subordinated can escape into these hidden spaces to find their ways of resistance. Therefore, female migrant partners should not be merely seen as passive victims; instead they should be understood as active agents constantly seeking spaces which are not yet colonized by the dominants. These hidden spaces produced by contradictory social relations create affirmative spaces for their own interests.

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